

# Neighborhood Business District Strategy

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In an effort to stimulate and enliven Seattle's neighborhood business districts—the neighborhood centers where people interact and essential goods, services, and jobs are provided—the City is proposing a new strategy to reflect changing conditions and neighborhood plan goals.

Seattle's regulations play an important role in maintaining the vitality and character of these business districts. The goal of the Neighborhood Business District Strategy is to improve an area's pedestrian and transit orientation, support job creation, enhance housing opportunities, and maintain compatibility with surrounding residential areas.



# Neighborhood Business District Strategy



## Key Recommendations

- Map pedestrian-oriented commercial cores in business districts.
- Remove unnecessary obstacles to residential uses in commercial areas.
- Strengthen pedestrian-oriented street front development standards and guidelines.
- Refine categories of uses and establish new allowed maximum size of businesses.
- Revise requirements for residential amenities.
- Control the impacts of building size by means that encourage wider sidewalks, plazas, ground-level open spaces, or view corridors.
- Lower parking requirements based on local demand and to support alternative transportation. In Urban Centers and high capacity transit station areas, allow the market rather than the code to determine appropriate parking supply.
- Encourage customer or short-term parking over commuter or long-term parking.
- Balance auto access and parking with the needs of pedestrians and transit.
- Simplify the City's regulations so that they are easier to understand.

## Why a Strategy for Neighborhood Business Districts?

Seattle is a city of neighborhoods. A neighborhood's character is often defined by its neighborhood business district, which provides a place for goods and services to be exchanged, as well as a place for neighbors to meet and entertain.

Seattle's neighborhood business districts are the heart of the City's urban village strategy and are anticipated to accept much of the city's future growth and development.

Seattle's zoning for neighborhood commercial areas has been in place for almost 20 years, during which, much has changed. The City has adopted a Comprehensive Plan detailing a growth management strategy for the future; neighborhood plans have been developed, envisioning the future of Seattle's many neighborhoods; and design review was adopted to provide flexibility and ensure that new development fits gracefully into a neighborhood's character.

To take advantage of these new tools and advance the goals of the plans and policies



that have been adopted, the Mayor asked the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) to develop a Neighborhood Business District Strategy. The focus of the proposed strategy is to:

- Create safer, more vibrant and accessible business areas;
- Support small business;
- Create more housing opportunities;
- Protect and enhance neighborhood character;
- Enhance the pedestrian environment by emphasizing pedestrians over cars; and
- Reduce the complexity of the City's Land Use Code.

DPD's recommendations have been informed by the participation of many individuals who have attended public forums, written letters, and participated in focus groups, advisory committees and workshops. The recommendations also rely on current research, neighborhood plans and the City's Comprehensive Plan.

#### WHAT THE NEIGHBORHOOD BUSINESS DISTRICT STRATEGY DOES NOT DO

- Rezone residential or industrial zones
- Include significant changes to height, bulk, or anticipated development densities.
- Change the primary role of commercial areas as places where business is conducted and goods and services are provided.
- Change development standards, such as setbacks to residential zones or include changes to nuisance regulations, such as noise and odor.



## Pedestrian Environment



Neighborhood business districts are enlivened by pedestrians. Local businesses thrive when pedestrians are able to move easily among stores and services.

Neighborhood commercial centers are sometimes compact centers where a broad range of goods and services are available to customers in close proximity. Other commercial areas have developed along arterial thoroughfares where pedestrians may be confronted by automobile noise and traffic, frequent curbcuts across sidewalks to access parking, or lengthy distances between stores and services. These zones are often characterized by indistinct or non-existent centers. Neighborhood commercial centers work best when they are compact, with well-designed structures, wider sidewalks and pedestrian amenities, and a thriving residential community.

To encourage compact, pedestrian-oriented centers, the Neighborhood Business District Strategy proposes to emphasize and expand current pedestrian zone designations. Pedestrian designated zones would continue to require non-residential uses at street level, in proximity to the sidewalk. But a broader range of uses would be allowed.

### Allowing Residential Use on the Streetfront

A broad mix of uses is key to the success of a pedestrian-oriented, neighborhood business district. Small businesses, particularly those who serve local residents, are often fragile. Vacant storefronts or large areas of surface parking may suggest that an area is not healthy, safe, or a good place to locate a business, while requiring too much commercial space may increase the likelihood of vacant storefronts.

An alternative to requiring street front commercial space, is to allow housing to complement



commercial development in some areas. Well-designed residential development at the street can enhance the pedestrian experience, create distinctive urban neighborhoods, and provide the customers necessary for new and thriving business enterprises. Encouraging more housing also helps to meet the City's growth management objectives and reduces reliance on automobiles, contributing to efforts to reduce congestion in the city.

The Neighborhood Business District Strategy proposes a single pedestrian designation to indicate where non-residential use will be required, outside of which, residential uses will be allowed along the commercial street. Guidelines and standards are proposed to ensure that residential development contributes positively to the pedestrian environment.

### Key Recommendations for Pedestrian Zones

- Adopt one pedestrian designation (current pedestrian 1 and pedestrian 2 designations will be re-designated "pedestrian").
- Revise criteria for establishing a pedestrian designated area to broaden its purpose.
- Expand pedestrian designated areas initially in six neighborhoods (Admiral, Columbia City, Eastlake, Greenwood, Lake City and Madison/Miller), chosen due to current development activity, community interest and/or the opportunity to implement neighborhood plans. Other neighborhood business districts will be evaluated in 2005.
- Broaden the range of uses that qualify for street level use.



## Street-Front Standards & Guidelines



The Land Use Code helps define building forms and density, minimizing the impacts of new development. Other features, such as wider sidewalks, overhead weather protection, street trees, seating, and pedestrian-scaled light fixtures also help to shape the character of a business district. These development features enhance other, more prescriptive, standards limiting the height, bulk and scale of buildings.

Currently, most new development projects in neighborhood commercial zones are subject to the Design Review Process which helps to ensure that new development fits well into existing neighborhoods.

To further ensure that the streetfront is well designed and friendly to pedestrians, the Neighborhood Business District Strategy has identified a number of recommendations that will improve the pedestrian environment.

### Key Recommendations for the Pedestrian Streetfront

- Broaden the applicability of existing pedestrian street-front standards by:
  - ♦ Limiting the setback of buildings from the sidewalk.
  - ♦ Prohibiting parking between the building and the street.
  - ♦ Reducing the presence of blank walls along the pedestrian street.
  - ♦ Maintaining minimum commercial space standards for viable businesses.
- Further improve the pedestrian environment by:
  - ♦ Prohibiting parking lots from being located on corners and limit the number of driveways across sidewalks in neighborhood commercial zones.
  - ♦ In auto-oriented areas, requiring buildings to be located next to sidewalks or require landscaped, curbed, well-lit pedestrian pathways from adjacent sidewalks, through parking lots, to a building or business establishment.
  - ♦ Encouraging the appearance of multiple storefronts.
  - ♦ Granting departures through Design Review for visually prominent residential entrances, such as "grand stairways" or stoops.



Seattle has five neighborhood commercial zones: NCI, NC2, NC3, CI, and C2. Each zone differs in their general orientation to the pedestrian (NC1, NC2, NC3) or to the automobile (CI, C2) and in the mix of uses permitted and range of services provided. For example, NCI and NC2 zones are generally oriented to the surrounding neighborhood, while NC3 zones are intended to attract a diverse, citywide or regional clientele.

Over 115 different uses are currently identified, with only limited differences among many of them. Neighborhood Business District Strategy proposes that the list of uses be consolidated into broader uses, distinguished by the nature of their impacts.

Currently, the City limits the size of businesses in NCI and NC2 zones to maintain their scale and pedestrian orientation. Certain businesses in NC3 zones are limited in size to ensure a pedestrian scale and function. In all zones, expansion is allowed for established businesses. There are generally no size of use limitations in the auto-oriented CI and C2 zones, however, office uses are limited in CI and C2 zones to encourage their location in areas with better pedestrian, transit and bicycle access.

To support small businesses and the vitality of commercial areas, the Neighborhood Business

District Strategy proposes to revise business size limitations for new businesses to match existing business sizes. This maintains the relative scale of neighborhood commercial areas, while acknowledging the need for flexibility in how existing spaces can be occupied.

To limit storefront vacancies and ensure a timely change of use process, the Neighborhood Business District Strategy proposes that new businesses not be required to provide additional parking if they occupy an existing space where parking may be currently deficient.

### Key Recommendations for Uses

- Consolidate the list of uses. Distinguish uses only to the extent that regulation warrants due to impacts or activities associated with the use.
- Revise size of use limitations in neighborhood commercial zones.
- Allow more flexibility when a new use locates in an existing structure that doesn't meet current code requirements.

## Development Standards



Development standards in the Land Use Code establish building height, bulk and scale, setbacks, open space, and lot coverage. In neighborhood business districts, the scale of development is governed by the size of the lot and the height of buildings. Height limits vary among zones and are independent of the zone classification, while other standards apply more uniformly.

Standards that are not proposed to change under the Neighborhood Business District Strategy include the following:

- Zoned height limits;
- Setbacks from abutting residentially zoned lots;
- Standards governing noise, odor, or light and glare.

### Height, Bulk and Density Standards

In Commercial zones, height is generally governed by the zoned height limit, however, additional height is permitted, in limited circumstances, to account for well-designed ground level retail spaces. In such cases, additional height up to a maximum of seven feet (7') is allowed when the number of stories a building contains or the density of the building that results is no more than that anticipated under the

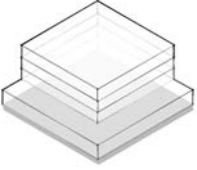
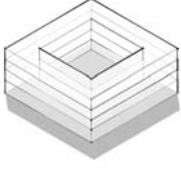
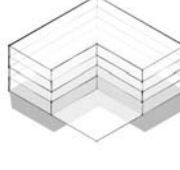

height limit (e.g. 3 stories in 30', or 4 stories in 40'). To make it possible to build buildings that will attract ground level commercial uses and add housing above the non-residential base, it may be necessary to allow additional height, for example, as required by a supermarket or drugstore, that may need up to 20 feet, floor to ceiling. These are important services in neighborhood commercial areas and as these establishments evolve and grow, it is desirable that they incorporate residential uses in development plans. This ensures more efficient use of commercially zoned land, additional housing supply close to goods and services, and more vibrant and successful business communities.

For mixed-use buildings, bulk is governed by the lot coverage limitation of 64 percent for the portion of the building above the street level, containing residential units. Commercial buildings containing no residential uses may occupy the full volume of a commercial lot when not located on the edge of a residential zone. This requirement is only modifiable through design review.

For consistency, the Neighborhood Business District Strategy recommends implementation of a Floor Area Ratio (FAR) for all uses to regulate bulk and density. FAR will encourage wider sidewalks, plazas and open space, and room for pedestrian





Allowed by Existing Code		Not Allowed by Existing Code	
			
Typical building form: podium above lot line-to-lot line first floor	Interior courtyard with exterior walls built to the lot line	Ground level plaza with upper stories covering more than 64% of lot	Terraced upper floors with any one upper floor covering more than 64% of lot

amenities such as sidewalk cafes and allow retail uses to spill out onto the commercial street, creating a more informal and comfortable pedestrian experience. Base FARs would result in a size of development that is generally equivalent to that allowed under the current 64 percent lot coverage limit.

Currently, residential-only buildings have density limitations while mixed-use buildings do not. This was intended to encourage mixed-use buildings. However, the incentive to build substantially more residential units in a mixed-use building resulted in an amount of commercial space that is not often sustainable by the market and is likely to remain vacant or difficult to lease. These spaces frequently become the location of marginal businesses that do little to serve the surrounding community. Identifying where non-residential uses will be required at street level (see page 6), and treating residential-only buildings the same as mixed-use buildings, eliminates the incentive to build commercial spaces where they may be ill-advised and contribute little to the neighborhood business district, while still achieving housing goals. Density will be limited by the FAR applicable to the property and by bulk controls, including height, permitted by the Code.

## Key Recommendations for Development Standards

- Add Floor Area Ratio (FAR) limits for all uses, rather than the current 64 percent upper level lot coverage limitation, which only applied to mixed-use structures.
  - ♦ To allow more flexibility in the location of building massing, which is also addressed in the Design Review process; and
  - ♦ To help control the bulk of commercial-only buildings
- Allow additional FAR when higher densities will help to meet other City and neighborhood objectives, such as focusing development around station areas and in revitalization areas.
- Eliminate current residential density limits for residential buildings.
- Through Design Review, allow departures from height limits for mixed-use buildings in order to accommodate well-designed commercial space at street level.

## Open Space

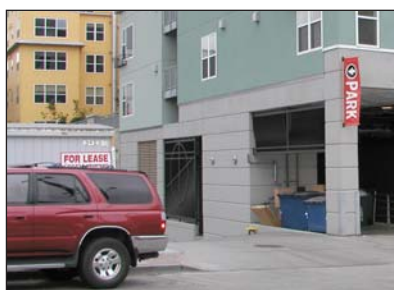


The Land Use Code defines “open space” as space for use by residents (not the general public), either interior or exterior. Current requirements for residential open space do not effectively correspond to the demand for residential amenities and result in higher development costs, raising higher housing costs. Current research reveals that residents prefer a broader variety of “residential amenities” (formerly called “open space”) such as community rooms, gyms, or roof decks.

### Key Recommendations for Residential Amenities Requirements

(formerly called open space)

- Provide residential amenity areas in an amount equal to at least 10 percent of the gross floor area of residential use, up to a maximum of 50 percent of the lot area
  - ♦ A maximum of 50 percent of the amenity area may be enclosed.
  - ♦ A maximum of 50 percent of the amenity area may be met off-site, by either constructing the amenity or by making a payment in lieu to the City for park improvements in the vicinity of the project.



Seattle's Land Use Code requires parking for new development. The code identifies the minimum number of spaces required based on the size of the use. These requirements, unchanged since the mid-1980s, are based on a national model that emphasizes single-occupant vehicle commuting, and suburban standards, rather than promoting transit goals and pedestrian orientation.

Changes are proposed to parking requirements based upon the City's 2000 Comprehensive Neighborhood Parking Study, in order to:

- advance the City's Urban Village strategy and encourage more pedestrian and transit-oriented development.
- reduce development costs that are passed onto consumers from disproportionate or unnecessary parking requirements.
- allow for the effective re-use of existing buildings and reduce tenant vacancies.
- better reflect higher transit use and parking demand data.
- allow market demand, rather than code requirements, to determine the appropriate amount of parking.

## Key Recommendations for Parking

- Eliminate minimum parking requirements in Urban Centers and monorail and light rail station areas to reflect transit accessibility, and to encourage new development in Urban Centers.
- A percentage of any on-site parking provided would be required to be short-term parking.
- Establish maximum limits for certain areas or uses or where appropriate.
- Waive additional parking required for uses that occupy existing commercial spaces for which parking may be deficient.
- Lower parking requirements throughout commercial areas based on new demand data, transit accessibility, and City transit and walking goals.
- Revise requirements for bicycle parking so that the number of parking spaces doesn't decrease when the number of required car spaces is reduced.





For more information on the Neighborhood Business District Strategy go to the website at [www.seattle.gov/dpd/planning/nbds](http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/planning/nbds) or contact Lish Whitson, DPD Planner, at (206)233-0079 or [nbds@seattle.gov](mailto:nbds@seattle.gov).

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